



Policies for including disabled students in Russia

by Irina Starikova

Summary

Growing attention to the issue of higher education for disabled people in Russia reflects the urgent and problematic character of the situation. This paper, based on current research in the field, proposes policy reforms on a regional level elaborated in the framework of the Higher Education Working Group of the International Policy Fellowship programme. Proposals include:

1. creating a service or appointing an employee responsible for the assistance of disabled students;
2. making the necessary architectural changes to ensure the accessibility of university buildings;
3. continuity of education for disabled children;
4. active efforts by universities towards communicating with potential students;
5. creating informational basis including information on rights and other relative issues for disabled persons in the sphere of higher education;
6. campaign for community awareness;
7. teachers' training on working with disabled students.

Background

The former socialist ideology of keeping the problems of disabled people in the shadows led to a situation of inaccessibility and exclusiveness in higher education. As a result of the political and economical reforms started in the 1990s, the situation did change. A legislation basis establishing greater possibilities for disabled people in higher education was established and has been subsequently developed upon. Furthermore, there are several successful projects within individual universities promoting the inclusion of disabled students. At the same time, the economic and financial crisis of the country has aggravated the problematic situation in higher education. Social and cultural attitudes are still inert and rigid.

Nowadays the participation of disabled people in higher education is increasing. According to the Russian Ministry of Education in 2001 there were approximately 5400 disabled students in 259 universities, and in 2002-2003 the number had doubled to more than 14, 500. There are 335 higher education institutions; 229 of which have disabled students. However the overall percentage of disabled students is still very small. From the total number of students of the Russian universities, the percentage of disabled students is 0.4%. Amongst the main obstacles that create this situation, the following could be listed:

1. inaccessible university buildings and classrooms for disabled students;
2. insufficient pre-university training for disabled university applicants;
3. a lack of information on the issues of legislation, opportunities and circumstances for the professional training of disabled persons;
4. passiveness of disabled representatives: disabled students, parents, and associations;
5. a lack of government support: local government neglect, poor financial support, and legislative difficulties;
6. a lack of awareness amongst university administrators and staff, in particular a lack of special training for teachers concerning inclusiveness.

The principal criticisms of current practices in higher education concern three main points:

- disabled school graduates have a small chance to find an appropriate job without higher education diploma;
- 'special university' graduates are less ready for independent life than graduates from mainstream universities;
- universities are not adjusted to meet the needs of disabled students and do not provide either an accessible environment or a corresponding curriculum.

On the other hand, the advantages of inclusive higher education may be outlined as following:

- development of equality and accessibility in education -mainstream university graduates have more chances for full life and worthy job -they have higher self-esteem compared to those studying in special universities or without higher education at all;
- disabled university graduates help to build a good basis for future inclusive education: they are good examples for other disabled potential students, some going on to become experts in law, pedagogic, social and psychological issues for disabled people;
- growth of social cognition and social toleration;
- general cost-effectiveness of inclusive education.

The alternative to determined reform is keeping the present situation unchanged and, in particular -continuing separation policies in higher education as well as the social separation of disabled people -continuing to neglect the growing need of disabled young people for higher education as well as the needs of disabled students in university -failing the promise of inclusive educational policies by failing to provide for responsible institutions and actors in the educational sector.

Proposed actions

1. Create a special service or appoint an employee responsible for assistance to disabled students. According to research carried out under this project, the real work toward inclusiveness starts when there is somebody responsible and obliged to report what has been done for disabled students in the university. Under ideal conditions of high public awareness there would be no need to make such a recommendation yet these are necessary to start the process of inclusiveness.

2. Necessary requirements of architectural accessibility of educational buildings. This research shows that 80% disabled students point to architecture inaccessibility as the main problem for acquiring higher education. All new buildings must be checked in respect of their accessibility. In reality, the most effective commissions are those which contain a disabled representative. In the meantime, old buildings must be adapted for disabled students.

3. Continuity of education for disabled children: active position of universities towards communication with potential university students. One of the most important problems for disabled students is that inclusiveness starts at university but is largely absent in pre-university education. Knowledge gained by disabled children in school does not correspond to state standards. Therefore, first of all, it is necessary to provide an adequate educational level and possible level of inclusiveness in school and kindergarten. In this respect, universities must take an active position toward creating communications with schools: pupils and teachers. Universities should provide full information concerning opportunities for disabled students, accessibility of buildings, classrooms and campus. It may be reflected also in brochures and on university websites. As a rule, universities should offer one-year preparatory courses. Additional classes may be organized on the basis of these courses: usually disabled students need extra training to acquire necessary knowledge for entering a university.

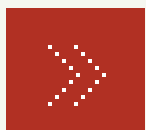
4. Create the informational basis on rights and other relative issues for disabled persons in higher education. Research shows that lack of information is a serious obstacle to higher education for disabled people. There are no centers consulting on the possibilities in higher education for them. In practice, students learn about such possibilities from other disabled people. Therefore there must be appointed people in every city, who could access all possible information in the area so that young disabled people and their parents could learn about their rights and opportunities. There must be also a united database on these questions in the Internet

available for everybody.

5. Growth of public awareness and developing cooperation. Providing information is a very important step for increasing public awareness. In interview, students report that often they avoid contacts with disabled university classmates because they do not know what is their disability and how they could help. Understanding the special needs of their disabled colleagues eliminates uncertainty and fears and improves healthy communication and collaboration among students. A very useful practice in this respect is so-called "Sensabilisation days": students, disabled students, teachers and social workers organize events that increase awareness of special needs in the university, sharing the everyday experience of disabled students for instance by driving around the university in a wheelchair, change classroom with eyes closed and so on.

6. Teachers' special training on work with disabled students. Interviews with disabled students show that teachers often do not know what kind of help they should offer to these students: fixing clue ideas on the blackboard, speak with face turned to the audience or else. In this way teachers have to be provided with opportunities to know these needs and disabled students - to have chance to inform them. The best practice is anonymous feedback forms at the beginning and in the middle of studying period. Pedagogical universities have to insert corresponding courses in the training program.

Finally, one of the most important items to reform is the adjustment of the physical environment. Although it is expensive, universities must meet this requirement as soon as possible. In circumstances of limited budgets, initially universities could provide an accessible environment for at least one category of disability and then develop it for the others. This will not require big finances but it will enable some disabled students to study.



Article referred to

Irina Starikova, 'Policies of inclusion of disabled students in Russia'
<http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00001753/>